

Aging Out

by Porpentine Charity Heartscape

Vetta says, "I'm aging out soon. I need somewhere to live."

The therapist tightens her lips. "Well, we have other programs. Special Assistance--"

"No one gets on that. Unless they're missing three legs."

Joke: a veteran goes to the assistance office and asks for a stipend. The supervisor shrugs. I can do nothing for you, she says. The veteran says, but my leg is gone! The supervisor says, you've only lost a leg. If I gave these funds to everyone with a leg missing, there'd be none left.

So the veteran goes home and gets her second leg cut off in a farming "accident". She comes back and says, how about now?

The supervisor looks at her and says, come back when you've lost three.

*

Vetta is rambling now, offended by a question about her education levels. "I read a lot of books. Did you ever read Granchoze?" She quotes fragments of Granchoze, feeling proud of her memorization.

Rituals of governance need to press into the private life of the people passing through public space, say at a security checkpoint. But not press so strongly they make people fight back. The point is to make them think of their embarrassing secrets, like smelling bad, being incontinent, their genital size, things more likely to be revealed during a search than a bomb. And then they get more anxious than angry, and they take it out on each other instead of the regime.

"Do you feel this is a regime?"

Vetta feels like she's said too much. "Sorry. I shouldn't be talking about Gra—about people like that."

"Why? She's taught in universities now. Things have loosened up since the war."

Vetta doesn't say anything.

"You said you were in the youth corp. The ones formed near the end of the war? If you didn't actually see conflict, I'm not sure which programs I can get you into."

Vetta swallows and licks her lips. She starts to speak but the therapist is rifling through a drawer.

“When you say you’re aging out—are you using the new calendar or the pre-war calendar?”

"What's the difference?"

"The old calendar uses 260 day years instead of 365."

"Oh. I don't know which calendar I'm using.”

“Do you even know how old you are?”

“Um.”

"Sometimes people from rural environments don’t receive a birth certificate. Many documents were burned during the war.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“Hmm.” The therapist slides open a drawer and shuffles through it for a long time, only her back visible from behind the desk, a plane of shifting maroon fabric. Vetta watches a

spider crawl across the diploma on the wall.

“There is one place that might take you. A new institute, with a more relaxed policy. A kind of school. If you graduate, you could get on a preferred vocation list.”

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Vetta goes to the bathroom and locks the door. She looks in the mirror at her pale, angular little face, uncauterized by hormones. She thinks of what the clinic doctor said. “Hermaphroditic”, “undeveloped”. The other youth at the clinic hostel have grown taller than her, even the ones younger than her. Are they? Pre-war calendar.

The names of the months are the same.

*

A boat takes Vetta to the isle. There is an old, three story building there that seems more like a mansion than a school, but everything has been painted white and there is crude cement reinforcing the building where it sags. In front of the building are rows of planters with little sprouts.

The isle's shore is clumps of pale tan dried mud shot through with thick roots. Students lean against the mud ridges formed around the root tangles, smoking cigarettes and

ignoring Vetta when she asks how to get some. Most of them are anywhere from 12 to 19. She feels like an unsynchronized blob at the edge of their groups and sub-groups, unsure which age she falls under.

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“Don’t think Vetta is tough. She’s not better than us. The youth corp didn’t fight. They were just stationed.”

“Is that true, Vetta?”

Vetta's face is a pale, squished stone. Any questions to which she has an answer have not yet been asked.

“I knew she was lying.”

*

“The school shouldn’t be here. It’s too close to the plant.” The older students talk about the plant sometimes.

“My mother worked at the plant. Until the incident.”

“Did she die in it?”

“She died of it.”

Vetta remembers people reacting to the plant incident when she was younger, but the memories don't seem real, like watching a grainy television program. Bad actors speaking too loudly.

She listens. The plant was on the coast. The plant took water from the sea, and returned it to the sea. There were many heroes that day.

*

They teach Modernizing Agriculture: The Central Citizen, and lots of remedial classes. Vetta pretends not to know how to read and do sums so she doesn't have to be in classes with the older kids.

It is nice to have breakfast and lunch and dinner every day.

Every week people who don't live on the isle come and give them tests. They ask them to identify scented cards and show them photographs of the night sky. They write down everything but say little.

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The older girls incite some younger ones to chase Vetta with a rusty pipe. They come running at her out of the sun. On the far side of the isle there is a cool dark cove that laps at her sprinting feet, digesting her footsteps into echoes. She disappears into the darkness.

She looks back, hoping the young girls have been scared away. It isn't easy to get down to the cove, the rocks are slippery and you kind of have to slide-fall in a controlled way before you hit sand.

As she trudges deeper inside the wet rock tunnel, something starts to hurt. Her lungs must be aching from the running. Her back where they hit her must be bruising. But why do her bones feel hot? She's never felt her bones before. This traitor skeleton is burning up. She hears footsteps crunching behind her and she tries to tell them to stop chasing her but she can't catch her breath. She turns around and they aren't there.

I should have hit them, she thinks. She looks at her fists and then her fists rise up as if to hit her because her whole body is falling and she didn't tell it to.

She lays on the ground, palms breaking her fall against the wet sand. Hot wetness, like a pot of boiled water spilled across the ground. She pulls her hands away but strips of her skin detach. Her gums feel like battery acid, what she imagines battery acid tastes like. She feels like she's dissolving inside and releasing something like the bitterness of

crushed raw garlic.

She bunches her sleeves around her hands and crawls from the cove, ears buzzing. It's dark outside.

*

She pukes quietly in the bathroom, bile dripping from her mouth onto wadded up toilet paper. The giggling and pissing of the other stalls suddenly whines metallic like an insect flew into her ear.

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At the end of the month, there is a dinner party. They tell everyone to be on their best behavior, because nice elegant people are visiting and they fund the school. All the electric lights are turned on and they're allowed to go into the fancy parts of the building, which have paintings and flowing curtains and chandeliers and the original wallpaper flaking on the walls.

Before the donors arrive, the teachers bring the kids into a room where dark shriveled things are laid on a table. Nice dresses of all sizes. Vetta picks the skinniest one but her lanky body can't fill it out, it sags around her. It's like an evening dress from a movie, with a little slit in the side.

Vetta gargles until her gums feel less acidic. The bathroom smells extremely bad for some reason. Like the floor is sticky with old piss. She hopes the donors smell it. But they probably have their own bathroom.

Adults titter with each other as students devour the appetizers. Some of the more precocious students, painted with lipstick and eyeshadow, talk to visitors in a way that annoys Vetta. She chews on a breaded shrimp but her teeth hurt. She looks for a place to throw it away, then feels a self-conscious prickle, like someone is about to tap her on the shoulder. But no one is even looking at her.

Vetta looks down and sees black oil below the floor, as if it were glass. Naked humans swim through it, pawing silently at the underside of the floor, staring up the students' skirts. They leer, the whites of their eyes and teeth shining. Golden necklaces and diamond rings slink and glint on their flesh.

She looks around to see if anyone else notices. Everyone is talking normally. Her head hurts. Whatever governs the flow of sound into her ears seems to be malfunctioning, their laughter is far too loud and abrasive.

She goes into the library, shaking her head as if to dislodge something. She hears a wet squeaking sound, like glass being rubbed. She peeks around a shelf into the area where the reading tables are. One of the tables is pushed aside, and one of the older girls is

slapping her cunt against the glass floor. Oily hands writhe on the other side.

Vetta goes back into the hall. She sees Csila, the oldest girl in her remedial reading class.

She helps Csila with essays sometimes.

“Csila. Is anything unusual happening.”

“What?”

“Just tell me. Is anything different happening. Things that do not normally happen to people.”

“Everything seems fine.”

“You don’t see anything unusual.”

“I told you no.” Cilla gives her a grimacing little laugh, like Vetta is crazy.

Vetta goes to the appetizer table and tucks crackers into her sagging bra.

In her bedroom that night, she lays them next to the other food she’s hoarded, neat as coins. The dress is slung over the foot of the bed like a shed snake skin.

The air through the window smells, for a moment, of crushed branches covered in ice. She closes her eyes and feels sanded wood curving in her hands. She lays there thinking about closing the window until she falls asleep.

*

An older girl, Dya, was a soldier. No one questions this. She has a bayonet scar across her shoulder, ugly and twisted like an upside down L. “They fed us while we were fighting. When we came home, people were boiling rats. The only sure food in this world is for soldiers.”

She blinks.

“So why are they feeding us?”

Vetta is studying the planters. The sprouts have turned to green shoots. She wonders what colors the flowers will be. Dya comes over to her and slaps the back of her head.

“You weren’t in the army,” Dya says.

“Why do you think I was in the army.”

“Jjan said you said.”

Vetta's palms itch where the skin is healing from the sand burns. She turns and makes eye contact with Dya. Dya slaps her to the ground. She points her fingers and makes gun sounds. Ratatatat. "Liars don't have friends. They trick people but they are always found out."

*

Later that day it is Vetta's turn to wash dishes.

Her hands sink into the soapy water, past plates covered in potato and corned beef residue. She stares into the oily swirl. Bubbles pop and she can see her hands again. Refracted, pruny, pale, they don't feel like part of her. They look like a corpse's hands.

The ammonia smell of the kitchen sharpens. Her hands grab each other. She squeezes. These are alive hands. Alive hands.

*

Vetta emerges from the bathroom stall, her intestines stinging. She eats what everyone else eats but knows they don't have the same problem as her, she would smell it.

A girl comes into the bathroom and stares at Vetta.

“What?” Vetta says.

The girl checks her watch. She stands there a little longer, then leaves. Vetta wonders where she got it. It would be nice to have a watch.

*

A hand grabs Vetta by the shoulder. She tenses to run, then freezes. It’s an adult hand. They take her to a room she’s never seen before, a narrow closet-like room somewhere by the attic. Light from an unshielded lamp burns her eyes.

Two hard-faced women in heavy jackets stare at her.

“You raped a girl in the bathrooms.”

“No—”

“You were in the bathroom with Jjan?”

“Yes but—”

“Are you saying she lied to us? Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“People don’t just make up such important details. We are a liberalized country now. We take sex violence very seriously.”

*

They take her outside. The stalks have blossomed into a thousand white flowers, luminous in the sun.

*

She sits in the cell for a long time. She can’t sleep. The fans are broken. Can air run out of a room? She has trouble breathing. Even the little door-window is shut. She starts to hyperventilate.

She hears something against the door. She hopes it is someone come to get her, dearly hopes.

The sound is wet and slow. Dragging back and forth.

She steps closer to the door, as quietly as possible.

A wet sound, like saliva being sucked through teeth. The smell of her sweat grows sweeter.

She backs away from the door, her entire body tensed.

After three hours someone comes for her.

*

A small, hot room stained with cigarette smoke. A high sliver of a window gray with morning or evening or fumes.

One of the hard-faced women is there. She leans onto the table, strong arms piled up on it like logs.

“Is it true you were in the war.”

Silence.

“It is illegal to go around claiming such things. Hoping the therapist would take pity on you? Give you a little cash?”

Silence.

The woman peeks into the folder. “She can parrot the texts but lacks a true active mind. A magpie that hoards shiny things without understanding their value.’ Your therapist wrote this.”

Silence.

“You read too many war novels. You got carried away with yourself.”

Vetta scratches the inside of her wrist.

“I like to read too. I even read some proscribed things. Maybe it’s not all so bad. But you read the wrong things, you get all mixed up. How do you know which idea is real? You have one body, many ideas, you pull it in all these directions, go to pieces. Need to spend more time in real life. Find friends. Talk to other children.”

An officer comes into the room and hands the hard-faced woman a folder. Vetta hears the officer call the woman Agnit. “Many records from the war were lost. But some remain.” Agnit almost coyly slides something from the folder, as if it is full of countless incriminating documents that she could scatter through the air like confetti.

“You know this dumpy woman here?” She shows Vetta a grainy photograph of a middle-

aged woman standing at an intersection.

Vetta doesn't say anything.

"Your therapy transcripts show you speak highly of this woman."

"I've read her."

"You read her. Good. We need someone familiar with proscribed writing. You need to become close with her."

"What will happen to me?"

"Happen to you? This could be very good for you." Agnit scrapes the photo back into the folder and rasps out a typewritten paper. "Meet with Granchoze. Ask her these questions. We will be listening."

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They give her clothes commonly worn by students, a wire listener across her chest, and some O.K. books. She finds Granchoze at the campus.

It is strange meeting someone she idolized years ago. The book she found in the half-

burnt library, in a town cauterized of toponym, snow cooling the blackened buildings. “I have a transfer pass from Wolkhust Technic. I wanted to ask if I can attend your class in fall. I am interested in society theory.”

Granchoze waves her hand. “Everything is society theory now. Any class will do for you.”

“Specifically your model of cross-reinforcing opposed ideologies.”

“You’ve read me. So what? That makes you feel special? Reading proscribed semi-proscribed who the hell knows what kind of scribed literature? Why do you want to become a student?”

“I...I just...”

“Don’t poke at me with your I’s. Goodbye.” Granchoze walks away. The silence is filled with the whisper of dead leaves dragging themselves across the concrete.

Vetta follows her. “I am especially interested in your text on the three failures of the national sincerity aesthetic.”

Granchoze slows but does not stop. “That text was banned.”

“Everything you said came true.”

“Don’t be stupid, young and stupid.”

“Then show me how not to be stupid.”

“Are you an informant? A listener?”

“No.”

Granchoze fishes in her fanny pack for a cigarette and looks at it. “These are very bad.”

She lights it. “What was your name.”

“Vetta.”

“Maybe you'll have a better one next life.”

*

They have a spirited discussion at the Rainbow Unified Cafe. It's an unusually pretty evening, pink clouds distracting from the bullet holes in the signage.

“I cannot teach you any of those texts, but if you read my work on the decadence of

democratic culture, which is not banned, there are many parallels. It is not a text like my old texts, which were true, but very stupid. The only wisdom for a long time now will be what people can infer from those who write sideways. The rhizomatic networks that grow in the dark, sprawling from an innocent flower.”

*

Agnit stares at her phlegmatically across a plate of pasty macaroni in the government building cafeteria. “You did well. I’m not afraid to compliment someone when they have done well.” She pulls some money from her pocket. “Here.”

Vetta checks the bills. 50 dmar, smelling like cigarettes.

“At the end of the day we are both fed and that is good. You will appreciate that when you have a family of your own.”

*

Vetta buys a chocolate bar from the commissary and eats it in her room. It tastes very nice, so nice it becomes her whole world, content as a worm. But after a few minutes the smell of cheap chocolate in the small room makes her gag. She throws the wrapper away. A bitter scent lingers. She buries her head in a thin, scratchy pillow, which barely deforms around her.

*

A week later. The small room with the high window. Agnit and the woman from the first meeting. Their cigarette smoke fills the room. Vetta leans back in her chair. They lean forward.

The woman she doesn't know the name of says, "What did you really do during the war?"

Vetta bites her lip.

Agnit says in a softer voice, "Did you grow up around soldiers? Was it a town on the front lines?"

The other woman says, "Were you on a farm? Apprenticed? Factory effort? Or in the streets?"

Agnit flicks ash under the table. "It's hard on the streets. Hard to acclimate back to society. We can get you an apartment. Stipend."

"That sounds good."

“I know we have a hard reputation. But we aren’t that bad. A lot of people just get a warning. There are worse departments than ours.”

“You want me to do something?”

“Tell her to meet you at the cafe again.”

“What should we talk about?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just keep her there until 6:30.”

“Okay.”

Agnit snuffs out her cigarette. “I can see the cigarette smoke bothers you.” The other woman does the same. Agnit waggles her shoulders. “Is that better?”

“Thank you.”

Agnit pulls more money out. “Order something filling. You are skin and bones.”

*

Granchoze talks rapidly and with great enthusiasm about one of her banned books. Vetta

picks at a creamy pink soup full of freshly picked herbs. It is very good, but she can't seem to get much of it down.

At 6PM Vetta's throat pulses uncomfortably. She drinks deeply of her water. The cold of a storm drain seems to weigh on the table. The cold of a dark hall leading to iron, electricity, the inhuman masters sieved from nature. Granchoze orders a hot coffee, which makes her speak even faster. Vetta tries to shut out the sound. This dumpy old woman. Granchoze looks for a napkin, borrows one from another table, apologizing and chuckling to the people sitting there.

The clock behind the counter says 6:20. Vetta's hands feel frozen. She can't even squeeze them together to feel their aliveness. Granchoze has sketched out a circle on the napkin, with lots of little words that seem to crawl like ants, too fast to read.

"Do you want to teach one day?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"It's shit being a teacher, Vetta. Go into agricultural supervision or community accounting or some such shit. Anyone with a degree can apply. Mess around with those noisy, smelly, wheezing computers and say hmm-hmm at a ticker tape and look busy with a little clipboard. That's what anyone with sense will be doing. Extra rations, too."

“Seems like good advice.”

“Of course it’s good advice.” Granchoze talks about the role of computing in obfuscating bureaucratic responsibility. “One day it will be nothing but those magic boxes. They won't even need to be plugged in, the sun will be plummet into the sea and they'll still be pointing at boxes, box-shaped things, arcing the responsibility from their fingers into the aether. I would get paid before things become extra-evil and twisted, when things are still a bit clumsy and endearingly, merely awful.”

6:25. Vetta’s thighs tense, then slack.

The time to say something has passed.

6:28. The cafe is mostly empty. The waiter and the cashier have disappeared.

6:29. Granchoze has switched to the other side of the napkin, ink blotting through so both sides overlap. She has this big, oafish grin on her face. “You will love this. A stupid idea, but very fun.”

Vetta hears the kitchen door swing, then hears a table being pushed aside behind her. A woman with the cropped hair of a soldier, face distant and sealed. “Come with me, miss,” she says to Granchoze, hand reaching inside her jacket. Granchoze looks up at her, then down at her napkin, then up again, a kind of hapless look on her face.

Someone else appears behind Granchoze, the bald person who was reading the paper behind her the whole time. “I, of course, just--” Granchoze starts stuffing her things back into her fanny pack and tries to finish her coffee with a shaking hand. The bald soldier's hand locks around Granchoze's arm.

Vetta flings a cup. Hot coffee spatters the cropped soldier's face. Vetta stands up, her chair falling to the floor like discarded scaffolding. The soldier is twice her height. She kicks the soldier's kneecap, snap, the soldier sags, one arm grabbing Vetta and the other pulling her handgun out. The soldier squeezes the trigger. Blood spatters the ceiling and drips back down, descending from its futile journey into the heavens.

Vetta releases the soldier's hand from where she twisted it back and the faceless body hits the floor.

The rustle of a hand in a jacket pocket.

She covers her eyes against the red rain so she can aim clear past Granchoze's shoulder. When she fires the handgun, it feels like her arm is popping from its socket. The soldier behind Granchoze claws at a nearby table, bleeding into black tea and beet slaw, then slides onto the floor, dragging a tablecloth with her, spoons and bowls bouncing and breaking, vase erupting a vomit of tired old white flowers.

Vetta sees Agnit crossing the street, a semi-automatic pistol sliding from her heavy coat. The gray sky is shot through with silver and iron, reflected molten in the puddles of the street. Agnit points the little black mouth of the gun at her and Vetta's pupils dilate in response, black holes on black holes.

She aims down the sights and pulls the trigger three times fast. Agnit stumbles back into traffic and a car slams her across the asphalt. Agnit staggers to her feet then falls against the curb, broken leg jutting into the street. The driver barks angrily then sees Agnit slowly lifting her gun toward the car. The car reverses and disappears around the corner.

Vetta grabs Granchoze's soft hand and they go past the counter, through the kitchen, into the back alley. Two bikes. A Ban and a Vesky.

Joke: Why do you ride a Vesky backwards?

She can't recall the punchline. But the existence of the punchline is significant. She takes the Ban and shoots the tires of the Vesky.

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Granchoze's arms wrap around her chest, a ring digging into Vetta's skin. But she can't feel much.

They drive into the forest at the edge of town. After an hour or two, Granchoze mumbles into her back. “Dorni was showing films. She thought they would be less likely to be noticed than books. Ephemeral. Besides, the students sleep through them anyways. No one wants to watch one of Erm’s 5 hour slow pans through the taiga and the leper colony and the drystack and so forth. But someone talked. The students are all denouncing anyone they can. They know it’s the only way up.”

They stop so Granchoze can piss. Vetta thinks, I need to do that too, don’t I?

She realizes her trouser legs are wet, that it happened somewhere on that cold, numb ride, eyes eating the road like cameras.

Granchoze staggers back out of the trees and tries to light a cigarette. Her hand is too shaky and the wind too strong. Vetta holds the lighter for her, cupped a little too close in her hand.

“Every old hag who knows anything is being tossed in the rubbish. The memory of the nation is being wiped clean.”

Vetta checks the magazine on her handgun, slides it back in.

“I don’t understand why you’re helping me. I’m old. You could do something with your life. Fall in love, buy a rug, whatever people do when they’re alive.”

“I’m not alive.”

Granchoze stares at her, the evening light turning her glasses to red coins. “I can see that. Thank you, not-alive person.”

They drive for another hour, keeping to the side roads. The fallen mansions of oligarchs rot through the trees. Granchoze murmurs, “I’m old and somehow alive. And you say you are dead.” Vetta feels two warm wet spots grow in the back of her shirt. “You are too young to be dead. Too young to lose your name. I won’t let it...won’t let it...” Her weight sags against Vetta.

Granchoze sleeps for a bit, until the road becomes too poorly maintained to even be awake on. They drag the bike through the forest. “We’re going to become lost and frozen little popsicles,” Granchoze says.

They cross a crumbling bridge over rushing, freezing water. A huge boulder mars the bank, a log jutting as if shoved into the rock itself. As they near, the rock turns to rust, icicles running along the muzzle of a tank.

A gas station store with the emblem of the old nationalized park stenciled on it. Half the park was turned to farmland or strip cut lumber during the war, the other half became the war. A corner of the store is caved in, sunk into a blast crater. They find tattered maps on

a spindle. Granchoze tries to piece together where they are from the water-damaged paper. “I think we could go...east and reach the border of Half-Murland. They might not shoot us.”

Moonlight across the ruined aisles, t-shirts rotting off the walls, empty cans scattered across the floor.

Vetta wakes to the sound of rustling. A heavy, steadier rustling than leaves prefer. The glass door is painted over with black paint, so she listens at it. On the other side something is scratching.

She opens the door, sliding the gun from her waistband.

A darkness of silently waving leaves. And a darkness where the darkness does not move. Vetta smells the dried piss on her leg very strongly now for some reason.

The darkness comes closer. Hunched over. Glistening with oil. The whites of its teeth and eyes shining.

The gun seems to vibrate in her hand. The old burn on her palm itches.

She closes the door very slowly.

Something wet rubs against it all night.

*

They melt snow against the bike's engine and drink. Vetta spits a dead leaf from her mouth and says, "Do you really think Half-Murland would not shoot us?"

"We could be useful. You were an informant. You know things."

"Not much."

"Do you know how to lie?"

"I lied to you. At the school."

"You said no, once. That's two letters. The rest was omission. Can you lie in full sentences?"

"Yes."

"Good. You've improved by a letter." Granchoze cleans her glasses. "If there's any use to old people it's telling you when something can kill you. Society! Culture! Haha!"

“I’ll lie to them.”

“That’s the spirit.”

*

She gets up to piss early in the morning. All the tightness of her body feels concentrated in her urethra. After a minute she manages a tense, staccato piss.

She sees a glint in the foliage. She pulls a branch aside. The ground is warm with melted frost, grass and mud melted together like vegetable fragments in a latrine.

Something shines against the green and brown. A gold ring.

She picks it up, then freezes. She drops the ring, as close to where she found it as possible. Then backs away from the quiet clearing.

She goes back to the rest stop. It takes longer to get back than she thought. There was no reason to go that far to piss. She quickens her pace across the overgrown parking lot.

Granchoze is still there, snoring behind the counter. Vetta’s breathing regulates. She shakes Granchoze’s foot. “We have to go.”

Granchoze makes a phlegmy sound but gets up, wiping the ash from her glasses on her even dirtier jacket.

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They drive for three hours until the tank is empty. They walk the bike to the edge of a small town. They pool all the money in their wallets and Granchoze goes to buy gas. Vetta stays behind to watch the bike.

When Granchoze gets back, Vetta is gone. Granchoze tries to understand why this would happen. Did Vetta decide she couldn't save both of them? Or did her depressive tendencies push her toward self-destruction? The bike is still here. She can't be far.

She walks into the woods. The canopy is darker than she expected, chilling her skin. The leaves seem still as cast iron fencing.

She finds Vetta staring into mounds of dead branches. Granchoze comes over. "Do you see it too?" Granchoze looks around. "I don't see anything." She studies the snow-encrusted brush, but all is still. Did Vetta spot a small animal?

Breeze silently wavers some of the brush, too slow to knock the snow off.

Vetta is shaking, almost too subtly to notice. "I could try harder to see," Granchoze says.

“It's better if you don't.” Vetta takes the gun from her waistband and holds it like she doesn't know what to do with it. Granchoze tries to take Vetta by the other hand. It hangs limp, as if boneless.

A sound like gums unsticking.

“The only way to use this on them is to use it on myself.” Vetta twists the gun around.

Granchoze puts her hand between Vetta's head and the gun. Her soft palm trembles, vibrating a strand of hair in Vetta's ear. “No. Your time isn't up yet.”

This close, Granchoze can feel the heat burning from Vetta's skin. Angry red rashes glow around her collar. “Are you burnt?”

Vetta's finger twitches at the trigger, too light to depress it.

“How did you get burnt?” Vetta doesn't seem to be listening anymore. Granchoze pulls the gun away from her very slowly. She takes one last look at the brush. Everything seems a little darker, as if flies, perfectly still, had covered the grass. Some of the brush is pressed down.

Granchoze leads Vetta back to the bike. She fills it with gasoline and helps Vetta get back

on. Vetta just sits there. Minutes pass. Granchoze holds the gun and stares at the treeline. Little flakes of snow slowly add their weight to the branches, creeping soft as cat feet.

A growling sound tears at her ears. Vetta starting the bike. She kicks at the ground and coasts back onto the road.

*

An hour later, Vetta goes blind. She brakes and veers and the bike jolts over hard things on the side of the road. She stumbles off and hears Granchoze struggling not to fall.

“What's wrong? Did you see something?”

“I’m blind.”

“What?”

“I can’t see.”

Granchoze drives, but she's halting and fearful of curves. She says, “Trust me, if you grew up when I did, you wouldn’t ride either. Remember those old yellow scooters? They requisitioned all the Topedes for the war because they made better bombs.”

“Is that true?”

“It’s funny. Laugh.”

Vetta changes the shape of her mouth a little. Granchoze goes on about the unreliability and certain death of stepping within twenty yards of a Topedes.

Vetta feels the air get colder, the world outside her body becoming dark as her interior. Her eyes don’t hurt at all.

*

Vetta wakes up. Granchoze is driving, steadier than before. Vetta can see a little. Light levels return, and then some color.

She feels Granchoze veer to avoid hitting something. Probably the side of the road.

“We’re better off me driving blind.”

“The tone you take!”

Vetta tries to drive. They don’t hit anything. The black river of the road, framed by green noise, is easy enough to follow.

She feels Granchoze's weight sinking around her back as Granchoze struggles to stay awake. The soft feeling of Granchoze's flesh around her is comforting. She feels as if she was sinking back into Granchoze and Granchoze was becoming the driver.

She tries to imagine the place that could support their worthless life. Some strange zoo of earth.

"They'll be watching at the border," Vetta says.

"Then we'll go to the least reasonable border. Ajerland. Become apprentices to a poultry farmer. Salvage scrap on the coast."

Stop talking, Vetta thinks. You can't talk your way out of this. Her grip tightens on the handlebars.

A blur in the road. Something about it seems sharper, more nerve-twitching than the rest.

A feeling old as childhood, the first time her nerves were trained to recognize fundamental properties of the universe. To know something could burn or bite her.

She skids and they tumble off. Granchoze is cursing, maybe skinned something, but Vetta stops listening after a few seconds.

Vetta crawls closer to the blur. It smells bad. Tiny black dots scatter. Bile swells in her

throat. Her hand wavers above it, then sinks. The fur is so soft. Her lungs kick like a gun and something warm comes from her face.

The big blur of Granchoze is at her side, hovering uncertainly. She finally sits next to Vetta and wipes her eyes. As Granchoze's sleeve works back and forth, Vetta knows old dried blood from the cafe is flaking away.

"There we go. Good as new."

Her gun. She replays the clack in her mind, tracks where it fell. She reaches for it, a dark blur on a dark road, but Granchoze picks it up and holds it awkwardly. "Don't—don't worry about it." Granchoze takes her glasses off and sits on the road with Vetta.

Silence. The road looks the same in every direction, and it could be evening or morning.

Something emerges from the roadkill. It has five points and passes through the air.

You are full of empty rooms. I can go inside you.

Vetta starts shaking and grinding her fists into her eyes, something like melted ice dripping through her knuckles. Granchoze holds her tight, this unfamiliar skinny body twitching between her old arms. She looks over Vetta's bony shoulder down the road. Her gaze drifts slowly along the shaded asphalt. Into the cracks full of rotting brown leaves. A

silence that applies pressure to the side of her heart.

We only hear the thunder when it's too late.

“We should get on the bike now.”

Vetta blinks. She yawns, her mouth stretched incredibly wide. She almost falls backwards into the road then steadies herself. She takes the gun from Granchoze's lap and holds it very carefully in both hands. “This was used.” She gets on the bike. “Can you hold it for me?” Granchoze takes the gun and puts it in her fanny pack. Next to the gun she feels the rustle of the napkin from the cafe.

Vetta stares at the trees, her foot on the pedal. Wind is finally coming through the branches, shaking the snow from the leaves in gusts of powder. She feels the warmth of Granchoze behind her, shielding her from the cold glass road beneath the wheels.

Vetta starts the engine and birds of death scatter from the trees. She drives into time.